Obesity Policy Report

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POLICY

The "where" of it: linking obesity and the environment

To say that many anti-obesity efforts in the United States are focused primarily on food may seem like a rather obvious, even useless, statement. Of course we've been talking about foods. The ones we eat (or don't), and how much (or how little) of them we consume, have a huge impact on our waistlines, not to mention our overall health. From the ongoing revision of USDA's Food Guide Pyramid to controversies over vending machines in schools, *what* we eat has become a subject of intense interest to government agencies, special interest groups and consumers in general.

This was certainly true in the summer of 2002, when lawyer Samuel Hirsch filed two lawsuits against McDonald's. All three of Hirsch's plaintiffs had serious weight problems, and all three blamed McDonald's food, claiming it was *what* they ate that had caused them so many problems.

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Since then, however, a second focus has emerged: the importance of exercise. It wasn't just *what* we ate but *how* we lived. State politicians bemoaned the lack of P.E. and nutrition classes in schools. HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson began wearing a pedometer and encouraged employees to take the stairs rather than the elevator. His agency unveiled a massive new public awareness campaign emphasizing the health benefits of similar "small steps."

Now a third element is about to be added to the mix — not *what* we eat or *how* we choose to spend our work and leisure time, but *where* we do both. The "built environment" is poised to become the next hot topic in the ongoing national debate over obesity.

But what is it? As defined by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, which held a conference on the subject late last month in Washington, D.C., the built environment "encompasses all of the buildings, spaces and products created or modified by people." That includes buildings (houses, schools, workplaces); zoning regulations; land use; parks and walking/bike trails; even transportation systems.

Granted, it's a fairly wide-ranging definition, and so too are the questions raised by the conference. How does our environment contribute to obesity? How does the design of the buildings and communities in which we work and live inhibit physical activity and promote a sedentary lifestyle — and what can be done to change the situation?

Our built environment has a profound effect on the choices we make every day regarding food and exercise, yet we often don't even realize it. That's not the case in other areas; we've been sensitized, perhaps overly so, to the dangers of certain processed foods, for instance. And all of us have seen at least one local news report on the "hidden dangers" of vending machines in schools. But how many segments have you seen about the fact that many new housing developments don't even have sidewalks, making it difficult for residents to go anywhere without a car? Or an examination of why new schools are often sited miles from the nearest residential area, making it impossible for kids to walk or bike? Or why communities build new highways, but don't require the construction of parallel pedestrian paths?

A new set of tools

The government may be working at cross-purposes in the war on obesity. It's a simple logistical problem. Agencies are spending vast sums of money to

convince Americans of the importance of physical activity. But if their working and living environments make it difficult or even impossible for people to exercise, what good is that message?

Altering the built environment will be a bit tricky, however. The same tools that have been used so effectively to enact change in other areas — legislation and federal policies — may not entirely fit the job. FDA can issue a new rule requiring stricter nutrition labeling requirements, and state legislatures can decide whether soda machines should be banned from elementary schools. But a federal agency can't tell thousands of communities to start converting old railroad tracks into bike paths *or else*. And for all of their power, the House and Senate can't force fresh-fruit vendors to open up shop in the inner city so that disadvantaged and minority residents can have better access to healthier foods.

Another term for the built environment could be the local environment. Much lip service is paid to the notion of grass-roots community action, but in this case, municipal and county governments are key to implementing change. City councils change zoning ordinances and building codes. Town planners and county commissioners have a big say in whether a new sidewalk gets built or a bike path is installed along a right-of-way.

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Thus far in the obesity debate, we've been conditioned to look to Washington for The Answer. "People are getting fatter; what's USDA and FDA going to do about it?" In the case of the built environment, though, changes will likely be more decentralized in nature. Rather than one response emanating from Capitol Hill, thousands of smaller customized solutions will crop up in towns and cities. This isn't to say that the federal government is entirely helpless; many agencies, including NIEHS, will play a major role in highlighting the environmental factors that contribute to obesity. But there likely won't be a magic bullet in the form of a single piece of over-arching legislation.

Culture shock

The big question is whether the built environment's relationship to obesity will catch fire with the American public and the media – whether it will truly become the third major focus in the debate, along with the *what* and the *how*, or be relegated to footnote status, something that legislators and industry groups only mention in passing.

The subject hasn't yet reached critical mass, and to be fair, it's still early. If conference attendance is any signal of public interest, NIEHS may be on to something; organizers originally expected to draw 200 attendees and wound up with triple that number.

It's a good start, but more needs to happen. Part of the challenge lies in expanding the traditional notions of what causes obesity. One gets the sense that both sides in the current debate are comfortably settling into their fox holes, content to lob an endless series of rhetorical grenades back and forth about lawsuits and personal responsibility. The tough part will be transitioning from talking about Big Macs to discussing zoning ordinances and the importance of accessible stairwells in large office buildings — and making people understand that the two are equally important. Will consumer groups that rail against vending machines in schools put the same amount of energy into advocating less politically sexy ideas, like funding for more pedestrian walkways?

Expanding the debate will mean accepting help from unexpected partners, as well. It may have appeared a bit odd to hear folks from the Federal Highway Administration and the Department of Housing and Urban Development talking about obesity at the NIEHS conference. Most of us are used to listening to dieticians and nutritionists, not statisticians and engineers. But it drives home the point that as concern over obesity grows, it's only natural that the number of people working on the problem will increase as well. Figuring out how to integrate these new resources with the traditional food-centered camp will be crucial.

Obesity is a dynamic problem, and our response to it evolves over time. This summer the movie "Super Size Me" (see page 20) is getting a lot of attention. But the national debate over obesity is itself becoming "super sized" as new ideas and approaches are brought into the fold. And who knows? Maybe a few years from now, we'll see another documentary hit the theaters, this one about a filmmaker who doggedly pursues a building contractor and asks him why he refuses to include wide sidewalks or biking trails in his plans for a new housing development.

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